Lost Lincoln Heritage: the Hardin Thomas House circa 1809-2009

Figure 1: *Hardin Thomas House/Lincoln Heritage House in 2006. Photograph: Matthew Rector*

It is with great sadness that we report the loss of the Hardin Thomas House, also known as the Lincoln Heritage House (Figure 1). The house was gutted by fire near the end of May, 2009, as a result of arson. The interiors were entirely destroyed and the exterior walls nearly so (Figure 2). It seems likely that what remains will have to be written off as a total loss, although there may be some scientific or sentimental reasons for saving the remaining logs. The Thomas house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 and was long well known in Elizabethtown. It was restored in the early 1970s through the efforts of a local group, Lincoln Heritage House, Inc., with grant assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It has been a landmark ever since along the waterfront in Elizabethtown's Freeman Lake Park. It is also commemorated with a highway marker by the Kentucky Historical Society (Figure 9).

This summer, the house was one of the "Passport" sites on the Lincoln Heritage Trail. It only adds insult to the injurious loss of this house that the arson attack occurred in 2009, the year of Kentucky's celebration of the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth in the state. The house was associated with Lincoln's father, Thomas, who is believed to have been the joiner who constructed the staircase, mantles, and other finish carpentry. The house itself has sometimes been attributed to him as well, although this seems less likely. The earliest known published reference to the house's association with Thomas Lincoln comes from 1869 in Samuel Haycraft's History of Elizabethtown, Kentucky and its Surroundings. Haycraft wrote that Hardin Thomas "...lived in a house rather better than usual for that day, the carpenter's work of which was executed by Thomas Lincoln, the father of the late President; and the most of that work is to be seen at this day, sound as a trout, although done upwards of sixty years ago." Although he is not explicit about this, his reference to *the carpenter's work of* [the house] suggests this is separate from the house construction itself, namely the finish such as moldings and mantles. This would have been a fairly typical division of labor in period house construction.

This is clarified some in an earlier communication from Haycraft, where he spoke of the house in 1865 in a personal letter to John B. Helm:

> I received yours of 22d June some time since, and being half sick & run to death with office & Court business, has delayed my answer In reference to my recollections of Abraham Lincolns father & Mother &c you have been laboring under a mistake, My own recollection of the Matter assures me that you were Mistaken & a letter I have from Abraham Lincoln himself Confirms all, The old man Lincoln — "Thomas Lincoln" but when here he was always called *Linkhorn* The old Gentleman was a young unmarried man when I first knew him in 1805 or 1806, he was a very illiterate man a tolerable Country house Carpenter worked some on my fathers house — in 1805 and afterward done all the Carpenter work on Hardin Thomas' house, the work is yet to be seen tolerably sound, He married Nancy Hanks whose Mother was a wife of old Sammy Youngs, the same old man that married Sousana Sawyer — Thomas Lincoln as the name was always spelld but pronounced Linkhorn was a low heavy built clumsy honest man, his wife was rather a heavy built Squatty woman, (the Lord only knows except Abe Enlow did where Abraham Lincoln got his length & his sense).[1]

Whether or not Thomas Lincoln constructed the log walls of the house cannot be known for sure, but the evidence of his having worked on the house is quite strong, coming as it does from someone who actually knew him.

Figure 2: *Hardin Thomas House, June 2009.*

[1] From Wilson, Douglas L., ed.; Davis, Rodney O., ed.; Haycraft, Samuel. *'Samuel Haycraft to John B. Helm' in 'Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln'* . Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. [format: book], [genre: letter]. Permission: University of Illinois Press, as found at http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.4228:1.lincoln , accessed on June 15, 2009.

Figure 3: *Thomas Lincoln Mantle, removed from the Hardin Thomas House in the early 20th century, as installed in the Leader's Club at Fort Knox. Photograph courtesy Fort Knox.*

One important element of the house still survives, as it was removed in 1919 and installed at an officer's mess at Fort Knox, and somewhat later reinstalled in the Leader's Club (Figure 3). This is known as the "Thomas Lincoln Mantle." When the house was dismantled and reconstructed on its new location in the early 1970s, the mantle was reproduced for the restoration.

The houses' unusual configuration of one large and one small log pen suggests that it was built in stages. The highway marker and the National Register Nomination for the house both claim that the smaller log pen was constructed in 1789. Inspection of what remains of the structure did not strongly support this. Only cut nails were observed in the structure, and cut nails were not produced until the 1790s and not in widespread use until the early years of the 19th century. The reasoning behind the 1789 date is based upon genealogical research rather than physical characteristics of the structure itself: descendents of Hardin Thomas maintained that his son, Jack Thomas was born in the house in 1790.[2] Beyond the construction details of the house, other historic sources do not support the early date. The first mention in Haycraft already quoted from 1869 points to an early 19th century date within living memory at the time. At least some later historians agreed with Haycraft:

> One question that baffles the members of the Hardin County Historical Society and historians who are concerned with preserving the house is the date of its construction. About forty-five years ago Mrs. R.

[2] Anon.: "The Elizabethtown Hardin Thomas House," circa 1964: copy of an unpaginated typescript paper in Heritage Council files.

W. Cates of Elizabethtown prepared a paper about old houses in the town. The following information is taken from her paper:

> "Next comes the house built by Hardin Thomas in 1805 on the farm just off the North Dixie Highway now operated by Heady Jenkins. The carpenter work was done by Thomas Lincoln and this year (1919) the mantel from this house has been installed in the library of the Officer's Mess at Fort Knox. The father of Mrs. Sally Smith (Mrs. J. F. Albert's mother) now more than 90 years old, was born there. This is a frame house, log within.

On the other hand if one follows the approximate date of the construction of the house as given by Haycraft ("upwards of sixty years ago") in 1869, the conclusion is that the house was constructed by Thomas Lincoln in 1809 at the age of 33, the year his famous son was born. Perhaps the date was sometime between the years 1805 to 1809, with most of the evidence leaning to the latter date.[3]

Somehow, by the time the house was restored and the historic marker was erected, the 1789 date of the smaller pen became accepted. It is possible we don't have access now to physical evidence that would revise our opinion earlier due to the fire and to earlier alterations to the house. Intact logs that can be ascertained to be original could ultimately be tested through dendrochronology to show a more certain date. Some logs appear to have been replaced in the restoration and later repairs.

Figure 4: *Hardin Thomas House, as it looked circa 1970. Photograph: James Jennings, Elizabethtown News, courtesy of the Hardin County History Museum.*

[3] Ibid.

Figure 5: *Hardin Thomas House, photo circa 1969 or before. Kentucky Heritage Council file photograph.*

Although 1789 is not a probable construction date for the smaller of the two pens, it is likely that the smaller log pen was constructed prior to the larger one that stands next to it, although it could also have been a free-standing contemporary structure that was adjoined at a later date. In Figure 4 and Figure 7 for example, pre-restoration photographs of the house, we can see that the smaller pen at left has six lower logs up to a height of one log above the door opening, then four longer logs above that that cantilever out toward the larger pen (these cantilevered logs appear to have been sawn off flush in the restoration, Figure 1). The four longer logs were probably added to heighten the original single-story structure at the time that the larger log pen was built, circa 1805-1809, or, if both pens were built at roughly the same time, at a later date when the free-standing smaller structure was adjoined to the main house. Later still, the smaller pen was framed up higher to match the roof line of the larger pen, as is made clear by a photograph showing the house in the process of being dismantled (Figure 8). It is impossible to know for sure when this final addition occurred, but it was probably in place by the mid-19th century, judging by the multi-pane window visible on the gable end in the photograph in Figure 5.

The surviving mantle from the house itself appears to date from the early 19th century (Figure 3, and details in Figure 6). The narrow profile Federal style moldings used in the mantle utilize elliptical or parabolic rather

than circular arcs, characteristic of a post-1806 date, when style books by architects such as Asher Benjamin introduced such moldings. Late eighteenth century Federal style structures typically have wider moldings with simple circular arcs or ogees. Given that it might take a few years for molding places to be widely distributed in the period, the evidence all together suggests the woodwork attributed to Lincoln most likely was executed around 1809. The house structure itself may precede this by a few years.

Figure 6: *Details of the Lincoln Mantle. Photographs: Matthew Rector, Cultural Resources Office, Environmental Management Division, Fort Knox.*

As the pre-restoration photographs show, the house was covered in weatherboards. Mrs. Cate's description above of the house as "a frame house, log within" is an interesting characterization of the way exterior weatherboarding was applied to log houses with furring strips leveling the surface and acting as nailers (these are apparent in Figure 7). It also tells us that the siding existed at least as early as 1919. Nowadays, log construction is inextricably linked to popular notions of log cabins and thus weatherboards are perceived as an inappropriate material, and are frequently removed in a renovation, as they were at the Hardin Thomas house. Historically, log construction was used for a wide range of dwellings ranging from the crude exposed log cabins so popular in the modern imagination, up to large, highly-finished and complex houses of wealthy landowners. The latter were typically finished in such a manner that their log construction could scarcely be discerned. The weatherboards may well have been original to this house, or at least to the larger of the two pens: the projection of logs from the surface beyond the notches at the corners and the similar projection of second floor joists beyond the face of the wall visible in Figure 4 suggests as much. Possibly, Thomas Lincoln himself applied the weatherboards to the house.

The houses' pre-restoration configuration is documented in only a few readily available photographs, although further documentation may yet be discovered. In Figure 5, for example, we see the only known photograph of

the house prior to any dismantling of the structure. Taken from the smaller pen side of the structure, it shows that its final configuration was that of a standard I-house, a long narrow form a single room deep and two stories tall. It is somewhat unusual that the house appears not to have had an ell appended to the back, as is normal for most Kentucky I-houses.

Figure 7: *Hardin Thomas House. Photo from the Lexington Herald-Leader, May 17, 1970*

Much about the Hardin Thomas house will never be known. As was all too common in restorations of the period, no historic structures report or measured documentation was undertaken prior to work – even the photographic record is sparse. Now, the house itself is mostly gone, reduced to a pile of charred logs. The last best hope for recovering historic information about this house lies underground. It is not clear if the house is still on its exact original site: the records suggest that it is, but it was dismantled in the restoration process, the chimneys were rebuilt, and the foundation replaced. Some have suggested it was moved a short distance, but period news accounts suggest it is still on its original site.[4]

[4] "Restoration Project: Work has begun on Restoring Heritage House." *Hardin County Enterprise*, 11/18/1971, section 2 (clipping on file at the Kentucky Heritage Council)

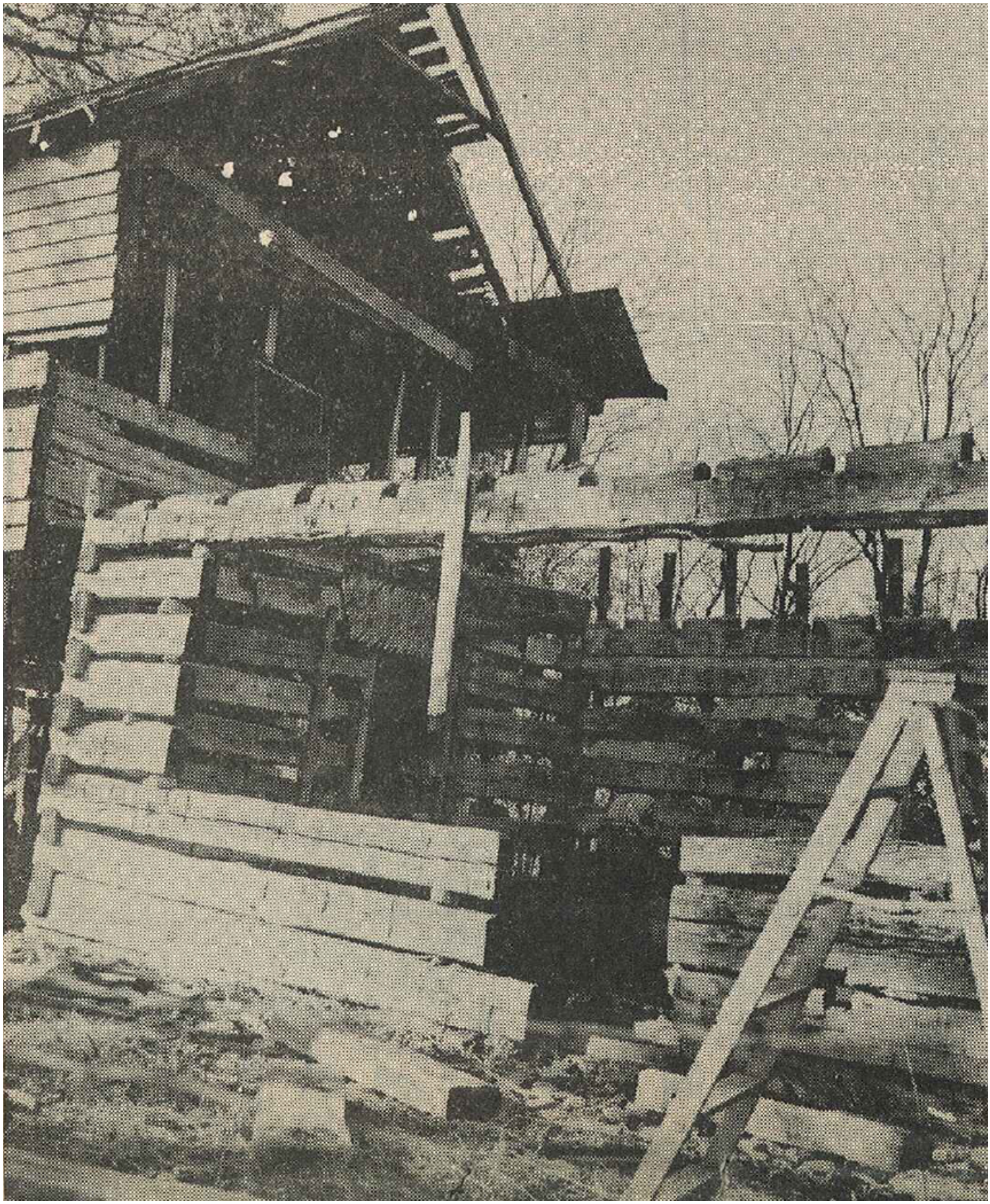

Figure 8: *Hardin Thomas House in the process of being dismantled, from the Hardin County Enterprise, November 18, 1971*

Figure 9: *Historic Marker at the site of the Lincoln Heritage House.*

Recommendations:

The loss of the Lincoln Heritage House is shocking and sad. Often we lose historic sites through demolition in the course of development. In cases where we have a formal review of that process, we often call for "mitigation." How can this loss be offsett? Of course, it never really can be, nothing can bring back the same house that is now gone. The very least we can do, though, is to preserve our memory of the place so that memory can continue to be a source of local identity and history.

Moving forward, it is suggested that Elizabethtown work towards an interpretive plan for the historic site of the Hardin Thomas house. The house itself appears to be a total loss and may even have been cleared by the time this report is issued. The site should be tested for archaeological remains that may provide further information about the house and the people who lived there over the years. If that testing shows that the site is promising, a full archaeological dig should be considered. This, together with a research effort, could provide information to be used in continued interpretation of the site. The research should include oral interviews with people involved in the restoration of the Hardin Thomas house. Conduct a search for notes and photographs from before and after the restoration, which will be crucial to any future interpretive effort. Future possibilities for such interpretation would range from minimal use of signage to an ambitious program of reconstruction, depending on what is feasible. One possibility might be to outline the house's footprint and plan on the ground in contrasting landscape materials with signage to interpret the site for users of the lakeside park. Tragic events such as the arson that occurred her run the danger of deflating a community's preservation spirit, but they may also prove to be a rallying cry to alert the community to the fragility of our architectural heritage and importance of saving what we can for the knowledge and enjoyment of future generations.